

Sunday, March 17, 2024
Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year B)

John 12.20-33

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/323415760360710>

(Sermon begins at about 21:55)

“Drawing All People”

Throughout our Lenten journey, we have been traveling with Jesus as he makes his way toward Jerusalem and to his Passion. At this point in the journey—just one week before Palm Sunday and the start of Holy Week—Jerusalem is on the horizon. Although in a bit of scriptural disconnect, Jesus is a week ahead of us. Our Gospel reading for today takes place immediately after Jesus has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem—what we now refer to as Palm Sunday. As we join the scene, there is a flurry of activity on multiple fronts—much of it behind the scenes of the Gospel passage.

As indicated in the passage, people from all over the known world are arriving in Jerusalem for the Passover festival later in the week. Behind the scenes, the temple authorities are plotting Jesus’ demise. Not too long before coming to Jerusalem, Jesus had raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. This set in motion the temple authorities plotting to kill both Jesus and Lazarus. They feared that the astonishing act of raising someone from the dead would prompt crowds to flock to Jesus, causing a commotion. This, in turn, might prompt the Roman occupiers to take preemptive action to prevent a potential Jewish rebellion. In the minds of the temple authorities, the more popular Jesus became with the masses, the more the temple—and those who ran it—would be at risk.

An indication of Jesus’ rising popularity is given by the fact that some Greeks who are in Jerusalem for Passover want to see Jesus. Philip and Andrew tell Jesus about these foreign visitors. In what turns out to be his last public teaching, Jesus provides an image that, while a bit cryptic in the moment, actually speaks to what these Greek seekers represent with respect to Jesus’ broader mission. Jesus begins by saying, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Recognizing that the end is near. That the plot of the temple authorities to get rid of him is now in play and will come to fruition by the end of the week.

He then continues with some thoughts on what it means for him to be glorified. He concludes with a summary statement that provides an indication of what will happen even beyond his death, of how he will be glorified. “‘And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.”

In referring to himself being “lifted up from the earth,” Jesus is not just referring to his death, but rather to his death, resurrection, and ascension. This is implied in the image he uses earlier about the grain of wheat: “Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Recognizing that when a grain is planted in the soil, it effectively dies. But then, under the right conditions, germination

occurs, resulting in a new sprout emerging, bringing new life. As that single sprout grows, it then goes on to produce many more grains, bearing an abundance of fruit, which in turn, when planted, produces even more fruit.

Jesus is very intentional in using this image. He is not just seeking to convey what will happen to him. In fact, he is not focusing on his own death per se as much as he is looking at the bigger picture. On what his death will make possible. He is sending a message about what will occur through and as a result of his death, resurrection, and ascension. How the Church will eventually develop and grow, spreading far beyond the single plot of land in which it originally began—alluded to by the presence of the Greeks who wish to see Jesus. An image of the vast growth the Church will experience and how the Church will go on to do even greater things than could have been accomplished by Jesus and his little band of followers alone.

Later, when alone with his disciples as they share the Passover meal, as Jesus shares his last meal with his friends and devoted followers, he delivers what is referred to as the “Farewell Discourse”—his final teachings and his final instructions to those who will take up his mantle and continue his mission and ministry. During that discourse, he expands on this image when he tells them, “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these” (Jn 14.12).

One commentator notes that “for John, the story of Jesus’ death is shot through with a kind of sacred, subversive irony. They thought they were burying him in a grave, but actually they were planting him like a seed. They thought they were killing him to ward off the Romans, but actually they were making possible a new harvest of ‘much fruit,’ a ‘lifting up’ through which Jesus will ‘draw all people to myself.’” A bringing together of the analogy Jesus uses for his own death, the historical events of Holy Week and Easter, and the course of history those events will make possible. God does indeed work in mysterious ways—often coopting human plans and actions for God’s own purposes.

Of course, our very existence as a church 2,000 years later is proof of what Jesus sought to convey in his final public teaching in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Throughout the last two millennia we have witnessed how the single seed that was Jesus, planted in a tomb on Good Friday, sprouted in resurrection on Easter Day, gave birth to something new which resulted in a harvest that bore, and continues to bear, much fruit. While what happened in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago resulted in the birth of the Christian tradition, its spread across the world is chronicled in many localized stories, glorious in their own right, of how in being lifted up Christ succeeded in drawing all people to himself.

One such story is of how the seed of Christianity was planted and grew in Ireland. One that beautifully illustrates Jesus’ message in today’s Gospel, as well as honors St. Patrick, whose feast day is today. One that also provides a foreshadowing of our annual Easter celebration.

It was Easter eve, 433 AD. That year, the eve of Easter coincided with the pagan Feast of Beltane and the Spring Equinox. St. Patrick had come to the Hill of Slane to prepare for the Great Vigil of Easter. At the same time, on the Hill of Tara, ten miles across the valley, the Druid festival of Beltane was about to be celebrated. Patrick knew that Laoghaire, the high king of

Ireland, would be at Tara for the celebration. In preparation for the festival, all fires, inside and out, were to be extinguished. The Druids would light a large ceremonial fire at Tara from which all other fires were to be lit.

On the Hill of Slane with darkness all around, Patrick kindled a large fire for the Easter vigil, in defiance of Druidic law. The high king and the Druid priests at Tara must have been astonished, even horrified, as they looked across the valley to Slane. Such a brazen act was considered blasphemous, punishable by death. As those at Tara watched in surprise, horror, and anger at such an affront to their beliefs, tradition has a Druid priest telling the king: "If that fire isn't put out tonight, it will burn forever."

The high king drove his chariot in anger to the Hill of Slane to arrest this rebel but Patrick was so eloquent in his preaching, the king was soon pacified and Patrick was allowed to preach Christianity to the pagan army. Indeed, the Druid priest was right. The fire was not put out, and the light of that paschal fire, the light of Christ, has burned in the land ever since.

As we near the end of our Lenten journey, making our final approach to Jerusalem over the coming week, we are given a preview of what is to come: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." A foreshadowing of the events surrounding Jesus' Passion during Holy Week. A foreshadowing of his resurrection on Easter, which we celebrate by lighting our own paschal fire, representing the light of Christ in the world. A foreshadowing of how the Church will develop and grow, spreading the light of Christ. A foreshadowing of how we, in our own lives of faith, continue to spread that light.